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ABSTRACT

Organizations, regardless of size and complexities, must depend on communication as a medium to effectively function. Regardless of the best-laid strategies, lack of communication may yield unfavorable results. Needless to state, organizational communication has been perceived as a challenge within many educational organizations. The intent of this article is to single out organizational communication as one area in need of improvement if schools are to strengthen their operational functions. This article covers the following communication components as they relate to elementary schools: (1) faculty to faculty; (2) faculty/staff to parents; (3) administration to faculty/staff; (4) certificated to classified staff; (5) administration to district; and (6) administrative communication. These components are not the limits but are instead a foundation to devise and implement strategies with the intent to improve organizational communication. The article concludes by discussing practical implications and suggestions for further investigation. The formulation of this article consists of the author's practical experiences in elementary education. (Author)

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Organizational Communication Strategies in Elementary Education

Alen Badal, Ph.D.

The complexities and challenges of leading an educational setting continue to become more challenging due to numerous factors; some expected, while others surface unexpectedly. Public education principals must be cognizant of management strategies aimed at more effectively leading a public educational institution to the next level. While a survey of principals may reveal numerous challenges worthy of scholarly investigations, the intent of this article is to single-out organizational communication as a point of reference. The author suggests practical communication strategies intended to assist stakeholders of elementary educational sites.

Organizations, regardless of size and complexities, must depend on communication as a medium to effectively functioning. Regardless of the best-laid strategies, without communication may potentially yield unfavorable results. Needless to state, organizational communication has been perceived as a challenge within many educational organizations. The intent of this article is to single-out organizational communication as one area in need of improvement if schools are to strengthen their operational functions.

This article will cover the following communication components, as related to elementary schools:

1. Faculty to Faculty
2. Faculty/Staff to Parents
3. Administration to Faculty/Staff
4. Certificated to Classified Staff
5. Administration to District
6. Administrative Communication

This article will conclude by discussing practical implications and suggestions for further investigation. The components listed above that will be discussed are not the limits; however, serve as a foundation to devise and implement strategies with the intent to

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improve organizational communication. The formulation of this article consists of the author's practical experiences in elementary education.

Faculty to Faculty

The complexities of running an educational institution have become more challenging, especially at the elementary level. Elementary site leaders are continuously looking for strategies to strengthen school-wide communication. The first strand of communication begins between the faculty.

When zeroing-in on improving an elementary school's academic achievement, it is simply not possible without continuous dialogue between faculty. The discussions needing to be focused shall be represented in a two-tier fashion: the first tier between the grade-level faculty, the second level, interdisciplinary, involving communication across all grade levels. To better facilitate communication between teachers, administration need to allocate time for faculty to meet at least monthly. The agenda items shall be structured to meet the current academic needs of the students. Additionally, the conversations shall be constructive and conclude with either tabled items/thoughts and/or outcome options/strategies.

At this point forward, the faculty should frequently meet to discuss progress on the proposed strategies/outcomes of the meeting. While the discussions are between faculty, the questions/solutions as a result should ultimately be communicated to administration, too.

Often communication challenges surface between faculty. One remedy to this would be structuring the meeting with a meeting chairperson. The chairperson role can often be a grade-level leader. This position can change from year to year, on a

vote/volunteer basis. The intent of this position is to keep structure within the meeting, as far as facilitating the meeting. The chairperson of the committee can either publish the minutes of the meeting or verbally meet with the principal. Ideally, the intent of interdisciplinary teams is to meet and discuss across all grades. All grade levels generally meet together during faculty meetings, so a 15-minute reporting-out may be beneficial to all.

Staff to Parents

In many instances, the discussions taking place between faculty involve students. Moreover, some or all conversation results may be of relevance to share with the parents of a child, for example. Aside from the conventional parent-teacher conference, a telephone conversation and/or brief meeting with parents by the classroom door once class session ends is the only opportunity to communicate with parents in many cases. A clear communication medium needs to be incorporated within elementary schools in order to inform parents of their child's academic progress, methods of assisting their child to progress further, academically, and general information regarding programs, etc.

The faculty represent the school and administration, too; therefore, for this reason it is vital to keep parents informed of the directions/progress the school is taking with respect to curriculum and other functions. Additionally, the school secretaries and custodial staff also play an intricate public relations role. Many informal communication takes place, daily, between secretaries, custodians and the families. The conversations should focus on the positives and methods to recruit parent participation, as it is a critical element in the formula to increase student academic achievement.

In academic contexts and even behaviorally, the communication should also be made by way of written notes to home. The communication shall be brief, yet concise, focusing on positives and areas in need of attention. Frequent communication between the staff/faculty and parents contributes to higher student success and more effective relations between the parents and the school, in general.

Administration to Faculty/Staff

One internal channel of communication involves the administration and the faculty. Conventionally, the conversations between the faculty and principal take place during faculty meetings; however, this does not provide enough dialogue time between the stakeholders. This is not to conclude that communication exists only at this time; simply to state more group dialogue is necessary. In most cases, contractual language limits the meeting as a faculty more frequent than a couple of meetings a month. The inclusion of a written communication on a weekly basis is necessary.

While the format of such letters differ; successful characteristics include reminders regarding the week's activities, a corner to discuss parent communication topics, and a section discussing curricular functions. This should not limit the communication correspondence; however, it should at the least include these topics.

The discussion of the topics should be brief and outlining comments. Moreover, points requiring additional communication can be included as agenda items for the next faculty meeting. This would provide the staff with an opportunity to consider solutions/comments prior to the meeting. While the staff communication letter is an excellent means to communicating, it should not single-out an individual, with the exception of commending a particular individual or group for a job well done, etc.

The communication letter should be considered as important as the faculty meeting; the significance of the weekly letter/memo to teachers needs to be clearly articulated to all. Often, it is not considered as critical and/or not read by some. This piece also keeps the entire staff aware on what is happening as it is circulated to all faculty/staff, where the faculty meeting and/or classified staff meetings normally do not include the entire staff.

Interdisciplinary group communication is a necessary strategy to update all faculty/staff on discussions/outcomes, etc. This can best be accomplished by the weekly memorandum to staff, perhaps highlighting specific meetings, agenda items and solutions. The topic of interdisciplinary teams transitions well to the dynamics of faculty meetings, regarding communication process.

As a result of the limited faculty meetings, monthly, the two meetings' agendas shall be lean, avoiding material that can be easily communicated via the staff weekly memorandum. Most faculty meetings are one-hour in length; therefore, administration should consider devoting time within at least one meeting for grade-level discussions and time at the second meeting for interdisciplinary discussion.

Grade level meetings should be facilitated by the grade chairperson and monitored by the administration, as the entire staff and administration are normally in one room/area. This makes it possible for administration to monitor discussion taking place within different grade levels. Moreover, the interdisciplinary meetings should include two respective grades, such as kindergarten teachers meeting with first grade teacher; second grade teachers meeting with third grade, etc. The communication/topics should be

structured and focusing around student data. These meeting are effective in that two teachers can discuss students that both have had the opportunity to teach.

The notion of "Knowledge Management" alludes to the inclusion of practical and theoretical expertise, which is akin a intangible asset; however, has the potential to yield tangible outcomes. Each respective staff member should be solicited and/or provided an opportunity to share strategies associated with the elementary school. The collaborative efforts can then be filtered by the administration and considered for implementation.

The process for solicitation can be accomplished by way of a survey and/or a faculty meeting, with teams breaking into smaller groups (perhaps grade-level) and reporting back to the principal. A consideration shall be an investigation into what other schools are doing and/or what the literature discusses, when comparing and weighing responses, as a result of the knowledge management process. This discussion can best be summarized as a collaborative communication between the administration and faculty/staff is critical, where a solicitation for knowledge applicable to the success of the school site is gathered, analyzed, and considered for implementation by the principal. This process requires precise and fluid communication between the parties, on a frequent basis.

One last note regarding the communication process between the faculty and administration involves the use of technology and the Internet. E-mail communication is a method that is highly popularized throughout organizations, even outside of the education sector. E-mail is a medium of communication that is fast and efficient; however, requires a personal computer and an e-mail account.

Elementary school sites generally equip classrooms with working computers connected to the Internet; the office and perhaps other locations, such as the library may house computers, too. Access to a computer should not be a challenge within an elementary school. The principal should sign-up all faculty/staff with an e-mail account and ask that it be checked at least once, daily. This process would enable communication to be disseminated when the weekly faculty/staff memorandum has already been distributed.

Certificated to Classified Communication

The classified staff at an elementary school usually include the custodial and secretarial staff; additionally, the kitchen and instructional assistants, too. Depending on the circumstance, verbal communication best suits these types of dialogues between the two parties. While the staff memorandum is appropriate, the custodial and/or the kitchen staff may not be continuously aware of the updates, etc. as they are usually not apart of the faculty meetings and many are part-time status employees working limited hours during the day.

In a special case, such as year-round education, it is necessary for teachers to have a clear channel of communication with the classified staff, such as custodians. The custodians are responsible to move furniture from room-to-room, for classroom rotation purposes. The task becomes easier if clear communication is maintained between the teacher and the custodian, as to what needs to be moved to where.

The kitchen staff needs to be communicated with regarding sack lunch preparation when going on a field trip. Too often the kitchen is not notified, where

lunches are prepared for all students, where a percentage will not be eating due to the field trip; this results in a waste of food.

Again, effective communication, especially when frequencies are limited is best accomplished by way of building rapport with the respective departments/associates within. At that point, communication medium can be limited to a written note and still carry the information along. Acquainting oneself with all members of an organization, in this case the school, build respect, which simplifies the communication process.

Administration to District

The communication between the district office and respective officers and the elementary school site is often conducted by way of e-mail and/or fax communication. The more worthy conversations are communicated by way of telephone. However, the principal is usually the communication source at the site. It is the principal's responsibility to delegate/inform the respective parties the communication may either directly or indirectly relate with. This process can best be accomplished by way of faculty meeting and/or memorandum to the staff, as previously discussed.

The district office and respective departments outside of the school site are critical in the support system for the elementary sites. Moreover, the communication between the school site and district office should be regular; the school site needs to implement any suggestions made by the district office. The implementation process is affective when stakeholders (school site) gather and to discuss timelines and responsible parties, which is a process of effective communication.

As noted, the majority of the communication is by way of e-mail; therefore, principals must check their e-mail at least three times, daily (recommended: morning,

noon, afternoon). On many occasions, a communication reply is not necessary at that time and/or requires further investigation/consultation from other members at the site before responding. For this reason, those correspondences via e-mail should be printed and categorized as to their response timelines/consultation members, etc. This process would combat against missing timelines and/or neglecting a reply.

Administrative Communication

Weekly administrative meetings/communication is one characteristic of an effective elementary school. It is not enough to communicate 'on the go' where the team is continuously striving to meet objectives without proper planning, etc. A weekly meeting, perhaps held on Friday mornings to cover calendar items/events for the following week should resemble a teaching lesson plan.

This meeting should take approximately one-half hour in length and include key administrative team members, such as the school secretary, head custodian, the assistant principal, principal, and other leadership, non-classroom teachers, including the counselor. Each member should be prepared with their calendar to share what they are expecting the following week; others should make note of the activities. The principal should conclude the meeting with any remarks regarding any items in need of special attention. Again, these meetings usually involve 5 to 6 people and should not last longer than thirty-minutes in length. The members can then share information with their peers, etc., as appropriate.

Communication Process

The discussion thus far have focused on the significance of communication, by way of verbal and/or written, etc. One single factor that can destroy an organization is lack of communication. To better conceptualize the discussions in this article, it is important to

note the channels of communication and responsible parties/frequencies. This would enable fluid communication to result, which potentially would lead to higher organizational morale and effectiveness/efficiency, overall. Stakeholders always appreciate being involved and communicated with. Exhibit 1 illustrates the divisional channels of communication coupled with responsible parties, frequencies, and methods.

Exhibit 1: Communication Process

Channel	Parties	Frequency	Method
Faculty to Faculty	Teachers	Weekly	E-mail; memos; faculty meetings
Faculty/Staff to Parents	Teachers/secretaries/custodians, etc.	Daily to weekly	In-person; notes
Administration to Faculty/Staff	Principal/teachers/custodians	Weekly	In-person; e-mail
Certificated to Classified Staff	Teachers/secretaries/custodians	As-needed	In-person
Administration to District	Principal to district divisions	As-needed	In-person; e-mail; telephone
Administrative Communication	Principal/secretary/teachers/custodians	Weekly	In-person

The communication process exhibited denotes the channels and responsible parties, coupled with suggestions regarding frequencies and methods of communicating. Incorporating an effective process potentially can increase the effectiveness of communication within the school site and between other departments within the district, also. The model is intended to guide the process; the facilitation of the communication process should be modeled by the principal and respective leaders within the school site.

Practical Implications and Concluding Thoughts

Traditional and year-round education are continuously becoming more and more challenging to lead. Increasing students' academic achievement and ensuring proper professional development for the staff are all primal on a principal's agenda, among others. With respect to year-round education, the process complicates the communication system even more. Every given month, with the exception of the custodial, secretarial,

and administrative staff, a group of teachers are off-track. Therefore, the model should be incorporated and communicated by teacher-leaders to those that are not present.

The communication process discussed potentially can improve communication within a school site. Furthermore, it provides practitioners in education with communication mediums for consideration. Also, it provides researchers in education communication variables to further investigate. The intent of this article was to discuss some practical communication mediums/strategies in elementary school sites. The proposed results are intended to improve communication among stakeholders in education (elementary) with a focus on improving student academic achievement.

The discussions thus far are not without limitations. First, they stem from practical considerations applicable to elementary school sites. The implementation of the discussed process, at the least, has an indirect impact on student academic achievement. The primal objective is to improve organizational communication. Lastly, the author suggests researchers consider investigating the literature and/or survey principals on the practical topic of this article. The practical discussions in this article have been furthered from a previous publication of the author's entitled: Management Strategies for Multi-track, Year-Round Elementary Schools. While much of the discussion surfaces in both articles, the focus of this article is on communication related to respective school-site stakeholders within an elementary school.

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